

The Priestess of the Lord Alligators

By Michael White

Drawings by Wladyslaw T. Benda

YES, Sahib, I am the Priestess of the Lord Alligators." The girl spoke with a touch of conscious pride as she motioned her hand with a tinkle of bangles toward a tank set in a sun bathed cloistered court.

Against the turquoise sky towered the massive grotesquely sculptured gopuras of the great Temple of Chandapur, sacred to the Lord Alligators. At that moment the slimy head of one of the ugly Lord-ships had bubbled to the surface of the water, and glared with dull unwinking villainous green eyes at Prichard. Prichard had dropped into the temple from his work nearby in building the Chandapur & Ohar electric railroad, the beneficent purpose of which was to bring more tourists and rupees to the Temple of the Lord Alligators.

"They are very holy animals," added the girl, as if their reputed sanctity conveyed an honorable reflection upon herself.

Prichard's glance turned from the scales on the muggar's head to the girl's face in wonder. It was difficult for an American to connect such a repulsive beast with so much beauty. If a Hindu girl's charm dies young like an exotic flower, it is a perfect delight to the eye as long as it lasts, and this girl was of the best type.

"Well," he questioned, "do you mean to say you like taking care of those brutes?"

"Oh, sahib," quickly replied the girl. "That is not all I do. I dance before the god. My name is Sovaratre (that is, Delight of Society,) and when I danced in the presence of the Maharaja of Indore he filled my mouth with gold coins. Will not the sahib be pleased to see me dance?" she interrogated naively.

Prichard's look rested on the cupid's bow of her lips with a look of admiration. "I have no doubt," he returned, "that you deserved more than your mouth could hold of gold coins, and the sahib will be mighty pleased to see you dance. But—but is that all there is to your life, Miss Delight of Society? Nothing else but the alligators and your stone god?"

The long lashes drooped over her eyes as she inclined her head downward. One of her small hands fingered the rich embroidery of her sari pensively. "Ahi, sahib," she spoke at last. "It is a long time now that Gupta Singh has been saving money to buy me from the temple and make me his wife. Yes, that is what I wish to be, Gupta Singh's wife."

"What!" exclaimed Prichard. "Not that young fellow, Gupta Singh, that I promoted to be a subengineer the other day?"

"He works for the lightning wires, Sahib; but it is always more money for me that the Brahmans want. I dance well; so I bring many rupees to the temple. But Gupta Singh says he has now what the Brahmans ask."

"Well, that's good," nodded Prichard. "It isn't right that you should slave your life out for those money grubbing Brahmans."

"And the sahib will come to see me dance?" urged the girl. "To-night I dance before the god, and if Gupta Singh is fortunate it will be the last time. So the Presence will come, will he not?"

The advancing note of a deep vibrating bell seemed to strike the girl with sudden fear, perhaps in being found talking with a sahib. In any case, she glanced hurriedly round, and without ceremony of leave taking quickly disappeared in one of the side galleries. As Prichard turned aside he nearly stumbled against an elephant entering at a stately pace. From his throat was suspended the deep tongued bell, and a half nude Brahman was perched on his neck. Neither the elephant nor the Brahman took notice of Prichard. To the Brahman, at any rate, Prichard was so far below his exalted caste that the white sahib might be said barely to exist. With lordly mien they passed on to salaam before and pour

libations on the innumerable shrines of the temple. "Think of my being regarded as an outcast by that outfit!" muttered Prichard indignantly as he strolled out of the court. "I'd like the chance to teach them differently!"

LET your mind picture a wide court overhung by the starlit canopy of night, and filled with a mass of white robed silent figures, many of whom had wreathed themselves with marigolds. Before the gathering a flight of steps led up to a broad platform, in turn giving access to a vast hall supported by monolith columns. Far back in its dark and mysterious interior, faintly illuminated by smoldering torches, rose a gigantic hideous image, garlanded with flowers and glistening with oil. In front of the image were placed three huge bowls of pure gold, containing the sacred elements of earth, fire, and water.

Such was the scene Prichard beheld as he stood at the edge of the throng waiting for the dance of the temple girls. At his side was a young native in semi-European dress, to whom he spoke in an undertone.

"Well, Gupta," he said, "have you fixed it up all right with the Brahmans?"

"I have the money," replied Gupta, "and I go to them afterward. They say I can then take Sovaratre for my wife."

"Um," mused Prichard, "I suppose you know the best way to deal with them; but if it was my case I'd take the girl first and hand over the money afterward. But there's nothing wrong with your choice, Gupta."

Presently from the wings of the temple proscenium a low thrumming of stringed instruments, pulsated by the rhythmic beating of drums, descended on the expectant audience. As if suddenly awakened, a light of anticipation flashed into swarthy faces. A sound approaching a wavelike murmur rose and fell. In the far perspective a procession of Brahmans—the Lords of Creation, in their own reckoning—passed across the inner stage and grouped themselves round the image, diminutive figures in comparison. Then a file of quaintly garbed girls moved on to the platform and stood with their backs to the audience. As the beat of drums grew more impatient, the girls began a swaying movement of body and limbs to the accompaniment of tiny silver bells on ankles and wrists. It was hardly dancing as we apply the term; but for all that it possessed a degree of fascination.

"I don't see her," said Prichard, stretching his gaze over the heads of the throng.

"She is not there," replied Gupta Singh. "Wait, you will see when she comes."

In a little the girls separated and, moving to each side, a single figure was discerned on the topmost step before the image.

"There! There!" spoke Gupta Singh with suppressed emotion. "That is Sovaratre!"

To Prichard she seemed more ethereal, more wraithlike, than when he had talked with her in the Court of the Alligators. Perhaps it was due to the supernatural weirdness of the whole *mise en scène*.

Presently she raised her arms and the music ceased. All eyes were fixed on the slip of a girl, occupying the center of the vast stage setting, all tongues silenced. A moment's pause, and her voice rang out high pitched and clear in some form of salutation; but the distance was too great for the words to reach Prichard's ears. Seven times she salaamed before the image. Then she came down center, as it were, a form as light as air, a seeming transparency

in her fluttering raiment. With compelling magnetism she entered upon a great dramatic theme. No word of explanation was necessary; for with every gesture of her beautiful arms, every flash of her dark eyes, every motion of her supple body, she portrayed a soul struggle of universal magnitude rising into a terrific tragedy of self sacrifice. Perhaps feeling that it was her last appearance, she surpassed herself; but in any case, when she came down from the heights and salaamed to the image, the Brahmans, and the audience, she could hardly have been unconscious of the tenseness in the hushed tribute.

"Great!" ejaculated Prichard. "I don't wonder, Gupta, that you saved up your money for her!"

The young man at his side said nothing. Doubtless his love for the girl was entirely beyond mere words of praise.

THEN, as the chorus moved back on the scene, Prichard became conscious that the moist heat and sickly odor of marigold flowers was utterly overpowering. Not even for another view of Sovaratre could he endure that atmosphere. So he struggled out of the court and, taking his way to the sahibs' quarter, dropped in at the bungalow of Carleton, Deputy Commissioner of the District. Prichard sank into a chair under the swinging punka and reached out his hand for a cheroot from the box offered him.

"I've been down to the temple to see that girl dance," he remarked. "Jove! She's a wonder, and mighty good looking."

"Ah!" ejaculated Carleton dryly. "Then, my dear fellow, I should strongly advise you not to go there again. Getting interested in a temple girl is a bad habit, for the simple reason that in no circumstances can she be made to fit in with your scheme of life."

"You're mistaken," said Prichard. "I have no intention of trying to make her do so. I'm merely interested in her on account of a young native engineer, who is better than the majority of the caste-scared and prejudiced idiots I have to work with. It seems he's saved up enough money to buy the girl out of the temple and make her his wife."

"What!" ejaculated Carleton incredulously. "Buy that girl out of the temple? Nonsense, Prichard! If your young man is going to do that, you had better count up the cash in your safe. In that event I fear he will fall into my hands, and go hence to picking jute or making carpets. Why, man, it would take a lac of rupees to meet the price the Brahmans would set upon her! Only a raja could do it."

"But they've come to an agreement with Gupta Singh," protested Prichard.

"Have they?" retorted Carleton scornfully. "Not if they know it! Of course those leeches will take his money, as they would yours or mine; but give up the girl who is a perfect mint of money to them—never! Your American business judgment ought to tell you that, Prichard."

"Why, now I come to think of her performance," replied Prichard, "it does hardly seem possible—from the Brahman point of view, of course. Still, I feel a bit sorry for Gupta. He's a decent young fellow, and the girl seems to want to get out of the rotten atmosphere of the temple."

"It's a pity certainly," nodded Carleton, "that this little romance can't be made to run out as your benevolent interest would direct; but it simply won't. Better advise Gupta to follow the usual course of society hereabouts and enter negotiations for some girl he has never seen and consequently can't break his heart over. The unconventional ways of a temple are not good for a young man. Urge him strongly in that fashion, and he may come to fatten in your service to the extent of a C-spring barouche or even an automobile, since he appears inclined to be up to date. Otherwise I am afraid I shall see him between two native policemen on a clearly proved charge of murder, trumped up of course by the Brahmans to get rid of him when they have sucked up his uttermost anna. Boy," he shouted, "bring the sahib more ice! Phew! It's hot enough to boil that soda water."

"It's too bad," reflected Prichard.

"As a rule quite so when a young man takes to casting sheep's eyes at a temple girl," agreed Carleton. "They nearly always land in my court on one charge or another. Escape is hardly possible when you have youthful human nature tossed as a ball between the Brahmans and the money lenders. They understand the game perfectly. For you or I to meddle in it would be utter foolishness. As you say, we should be beaten to a finish. But here's your ice, Prichard."

Prichard thought, though he did not reply, that if the occasion arose he would not quite so readily accept the situation of being beaten to a finish even by a combination of Brahmans and money lenders. He kept this idea to himself as he allowed Carleton to drift into other topics of conversation, which lasted until nearly midnight; then he left to stroll over to his own bungalow. He passed in through the com-



All Eyes Were Fixed on the Slip of a Girl.

pound, crunching the gravel path purposely to scare off the odd chance of a wandering serpent, and reached the veranda. There he halted and peered round; but without any definite reason, unless the stifling heat prompted him not to enter the house. Instead he stretched his limbs on a cane chair, though with little hope of sleep until a slight cooling of the air would come about an hour before sunrise.

SUDDENLY he sat bolt upright. A choking sob broke on his ear, and it seemed to rise at hand. But in the black darkness he failed to distinguish any definite object. Again the little sob fell on his ears.

"What's that?" he called. "Who's there?"

"Sahib! Sahib!" came the faltering response. "It is I, Sovaratre, the temple girl."

Then he felt his feet locked in close embrace.

"What in the world are you doing here?" he demanded, disengaging his feet and looking down at a white form which had crept upon him silently. "Great Scott! You know you ought not to be here at this hour."

"Sahib, Protector of the Poor," responded the broken voice, "you are Gupta's friend, and Gupta is in jail!"

"What!" cried Prichard, as Carleton's prophecy struck home to him. "Gupta in jail? What have they put him in jail for?"

"Ah, Sahib, I am the cause!" responded the girl. But how could I help it that he should love me? The Brahmins took his money and then laughed in his face when he asked me for his wife. Alas! he should have set his love on some other girl. What am I, a temple girl, that I should be loved by any man? Though it is true, as the Presence must know, I dance well."

"Yes, yes," he spoke hastily, but in a soothing tone, "no one would deny that, Delight of Society, but tell me about Gupta. Putting him in jail is interfering with my work, to begin with."

"Sahib," went on the girl, "Gupta grew angry with the Brahmins and cursed them as he turned to leave. That was a terrible sin, Sahib. Then Vishnath the chief Brahmin called Gupta back and asked him for the ruby he had hidden in his waistband. Gupta vowed he had not hidden a ruby in his waistband, but the Brahmins seized him and found it there. They declared he had stolen it from the image. It was no use for Gupta to protest his innocence, because two Brahmins swore they had watched him in the act, and who dare deny the word of a Brahmin? So Gupta was given to the police and is now in jail."

"Carleton was about right," exclaimed Prichard. "What an infernal bunch of rascals!"

"And—and it is all my fault," sobbed the girl, "that Gupta is now ruined. Carleton Sahib cannot do otherwise than believe the oath of the Brahmins. They will find a hundred witnesses that Gupta is a sacrilegious thief who stole the ruby from the god."

"Come, come!" Prichard lightly patted the girl on the head. "I don't intend to see Gupta railroaded to jail in that fashion. What's more—somehow—I'm going to bring you two together."

"Ah, Sahib," protested the girl, "that cannot be. I am bound to the temple. The Brahmins are all powerful."

"Don't care a cent for their darned power!" exclaimed Prichard. "Maybe to-morrow I'll give them a demonstration of another power that will stagger them."

The girl cast herself on her knees and strove to clasp Prichard's ankles in an outburst of gratitude; but he gently raised her up.

"No, no! That won't do at all," he protested firmly. "My thanks go to you for watching you dance. Now don't worry about Gupta, or what is going to happen to either of you. I'll attend to Mr. Vishnath—somehow. And by the same token I'm going to take payment in advance, since I guess it would be against all rules here to do so afterward."

He bent over the girl and touched her forehead lightly with his lips. At the same time as he passed a hand over her hair he plucked a flower which nestled in the coils.

"Now run back to the temple," he advised, "and don't say a word about coming to me to anyone. By this time to-morrow it will be all right for you and Gupta in spite of Carleton's 'beaten to a finish.'"

When the girl's form had vanished into the night, Prichard paced up and down the veranda, pulling at his pipe in a thoughtful mood. "If I could only get that Vishnath scoundrel to the powerhouse!" he murmured several times. "Well, I judge money would tempt him."

Presumably he at last saw his way clear to that end; for when he knocked the ashes out of his pipe and flung himself down on his chair it was with rather a grim smile that he closed his eyes in an effort to court sleep.

EARLY next morning Prichard's sice came with an urgent request for Carleton Sahib to look in at the powerhouse.

"Wants me to see his old wheels go round, I suppose," grumbled Carleton as he climbed into his dogcart.

On the way he stopped at the courthouse to hear the police report, and learned of Gupta's arrest.

"Ah," nodded Carleton, "so that's it! Prichard wants me to help in this temple girl business; but the odds are fifty to one that I can't. Little does he think what it is to drag the truth out of a dozen lying native witnesses."

He drove on and presently came to the powerhouse, a lightly built structure admitting as much air as possible. As he descended from the dogcart, Prichard met him with his pith hat thrust back on his head as if he had been hard at work.

"It's no use," began Carleton. "I told you something of the kind was sure to happen. I'm sorry, old man, but unless your Gupta can produce evidence that he didn't steal the ruby I'm afraid it will go hard with him. He ought to have known better than to entangle himself with a temple girl—which does not mean that there is necessarily anything against her character. The Brahmins take good care of their treasure, human or otherwise. But the district is in a disturbed state, and it wouldn't mend matters to stir up the Brahmins, in Chandapur of all places. I'll do my best for him of course, and at the worst he can appeal, but—"

"Why," interposed Prichard calmly, "I brought you up to see my new office. Come right in."

He led the way to a small inclosure of cheesecloth he had rigged up in the powerhouse. Carleton glanced round and stared at Prichard vacantly.

"Well," he said, "I don't see anything remarkable in a sort of inside tent for an office."

"No," retorted Prichard nonchalantly, "but you may in a short time. Just here," he pointed to one of the cloth partitions, "we are a bit close to the belt of the driving wheel; in fact within an inch or so. But that can't be helped, as they shipped us a rather old fashioned pattern of machinery."

"They did, eh?" ejaculated Carleton. "I'm just about as wise as I was before."

Prichard chuckled as he patted Carleton on the shoulder. "You'll be enlightened pretty soon, I guess. Now, I'll tell you what I want you to do. Just step behind the partition to the right of the driving wheel."

"But what for?" questioned Carleton dubiously.



What He Saw Beat All the Time Worn Tricks of the Temple.

"Wait till you see what happens. I'm expecting a visitor. In fact, he's coming up the road right now."

WITHOUT further explanation he thrust Carleton behind the partition and turned to watch the approach of a gaudily decorated bullock cart. In the cart sat a gaunt, lean old man, with the features of a hawk and enveloped in a winding sheet. On his caste-marked brow pride and avarice struggled for mastery. The pair of white bullocks with pink noses and gilded horns trotted up to the powerhouse, and the gaunt old man descended, displaying to the abject gaze of Prichard's coolies the sacred thread over his shoulder. Prichard received him with deference, and led him into his recently constructed office.

"You got my message, Vishnath, about buying that temple girl?" he said as he opened the conversation.

Vishnath, the chief Brahmin, slightly inclined his head.

"Good! Well, I guess as usual the question will resolve itself into a matter of rupees, and a pretty big pile of them."

From his pocket Prichard drew a heavy roll of

paper money, which he held without apparent design close to the partition at the spot near the driving belt. The old man's eyes gleamed as they feasted on the money.

"Just come over here," requested Prichard, "and count the money. If you don't find it's enough, we can then talk business."

Vishnath advanced eagerly with outstretched hands, until his thin talonlike fingers almost touched the roll. At that moment Prichard drew back a pace and dropped his other hand to a switch on his desk. A click was followed by the setting of the machinery in motion, and Vishnath's eyes started from their deep sunken sockets with amazement. What he saw beat all the time worn tricks of the temple. From his fingertips flames shot toward the revolving belt on the other side of the partition, while in a sinister voice Prichard warned him not to move or the fiend of the powerhouse would surely get him. With dilating eyes Vishnath stared at the flames, giving voice to a groan of terror. For all he knew to the contrary, he was about to be consumed by the fires of Gehenna. That he felt no actual pain perhaps only added to his bewilderment and a firm belief in a supernatural manifestation.

"Now," said Prichard, "you see what comes of practising villainy! Own up, you old sinner, that you charged Gupta falsely about the ruby, or I'll turn another switch and explode you into atoms!"

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" gasped Vishnath, with his gaze still fixed on the shooting flames. "It is as the magician sahib says. I am a poor man, who would do no harm to anyone."

"Very likely; but I'm not going to trust you. Admit that you placed the ruby in Gupta's waistband!"

"I did not do it."

"But you caused it to be done. Answer, or—"

Prichard dropped his hand to his desk again, and Vishnath shivered.

"It is as the sahib says," he groaned.

"Good!" ejaculated Prichard. "Now listen. You agreed with Gupta upon a certain price for the girl, Sovaratre. Has he not paid that sum?"

Vishnath glanced at Prichard and hesitated.

"Come, speak up!" urged Prichard threateningly. "I can turn on a whole lot more fire from the inferno if you want it."

"It is done as the sahib says," he answered.

"Very well, then. You will agree to send for the girl and hand her over to Gupta?"

Once more the Brahmin hesitated.

Prichard tapped his desk significantly, and the flames seemed to shoot from Vishnath's fingers with such force as if supplied by the evil one himself.

"The sahib's will shall be done!" groaned the Brahmin helplessly.

As Prichard switched off the current that held the machinery in motion, the flames died away from Vishnath's fingers. Vishnath promptly dropped to the floor in a heap.

ISAY," said Carleton, stepping out from behind the partition with a serious face. "I say, you know, I hope to goodness you haven't killed the old rascal. Though he may have deserved it, he is a Brahmin, and it would probably stir up a riot."

"Don't worry," grinned Prichard. "It's nothing more than the biggest scare he ever had from static electricity. You can try it yourself, if you like."

"No, thanks, I'd rather not," protested Carleton. "Those flames—well, I'd just as soon not be connected with your generators, or third rail, or whatever it is. I've no fancy to see myself whizzing along down your track like a beastly old trolley car."

Prichard laughed indulgently. "No fear of that," he explained. Vishnath was not connected with anything but that leather belt. The driving wheel belt of a sawmill would serve equally to draw the static current out of you if revolving at a sufficiently high rate of speed. It's on the same principle as the sparks you see flying out of the fur of a cat when passing your hand over her back."

"Ah!" ejaculated Carleton wisely. "Very clear, and interesting of course; but I prefer to keep my fingertips away from your cheesecloth. His Sacredness there doesn't look as if he had enjoyed the experience."

"Well, it served its purpose in making the old sinner confess his iniquity."

"Yes, and myself a lot of trouble," nodded Carleton. "I'll liberate Gupta, of course. But I think it would be best if we packed both him and the girl out of the district until the talk of this thing has blown over."

So they sent off Vishnath's bullock cart with his order to pick up the girl, while Carleton signed Gupta's release. An hour later both were on their way to a position that had been given to Gupta at the other end of the line.